

Striking a Balance: Navigating Ethical Complexity in Healthcare: A reply to Mandal, Jharna; Ponnambath, Dinoop Korol; Parija, Subhash Chandra

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ABSTRACT

Background: Medical ethics is a rational area of moral philosophy that addresses probable outcomes and disputes in duties and obligations. There are two schools of ethics that focus on decision-making: utilitarian and deontological. While in the utilitarian method, outcomes define the means and most benefit expected for the greatest number of people, in the deontological approach, outcomes/consequences may not only justify the means to attain them. In this paper we explore the idea of striking a balance proposed by Mandal J., et al (2016) between two very strong and conflicting ethical approaches (deontological & utilitarian) viewpoints while making ethical decisions in the healthcare industry and focusing on real-world implementation challenges of these ethical approaches. We argue about the practical implication of “balance” as well as the limitations of “Dual processing theory of moral judgment”.

Objectives: The objectives of this commentary are to critically analyze the concept of balance between utilitarian and deontological perspectives in ethical decision-making within healthcare and to highlight the challenges it poses in practical implementation.

Conclusions: In conclusion, it is emphasized that striking a balance in healthcare ethics is important yet difficult, necessitating a dedication to compassion and honesty as well as a sophisticated grasp of ethical reasoning. In order to provide patient care that is both ethically sound and patient-centered, healthcare practitioners work to integrate utilitarian and deontological principles while taking into account a variety of contextual elements.

Keywords: Deontology; Ethical decision-making; Healthcare ethics; Moral judgment complexities; Patient-centered care; Utilitarianism.

1. Introduction

This commentary discusses a paper “Utilitarian and deontological ethics in medicine by Mandal J., et al (2016)” that comprise of two well-known ethical frameworks utilitarianism and deontology providing distinct approaches for addressing ethical dilemmas. The conclusion of this article relied upon the fact that “both utilitarian and deontological perspectives have their own importance in medical ethics and both are mutually exclusive, hence a balance between these two perspectives would bring better harmony and justice to medical practice by utilizing Greene's dual process model (automatic processing with deontological judgment, and controlled processing with utilitarian judgment).

1.1. Objectives of the commentary

- (i) To critically analyze the concept of balance between utilitarian and deontological perspectives in ethical decision-making within healthcare.
- (ii) To highlight the challenges it poses in practical implementation.

The argument implies that utilitarian perspectives tend to trump deontological concerns in modern medical practice, resulting in ethical quandaries. While this may be true in some contexts, it misses situations in which deontological norms take precedence over utilitarian concerns, such as respecting patient autonomy or upholding professional obligations. Both deontological and utilitarian perspectives are important, but it is critical to understand when to use them and not favor one over the other. Currently, there is an overemphasis on the utilitarian

approach, which is putting a burden on daily care processes governed by deontological principles (Garbutt & Davies, 2011). The statement acknowledges the significance of both utilitarian and deontological perspectives in medical ethics, which is commendable. However, it simplifies the ethical landscape by presenting these perspectives as inherently opposed and in need of balance. One critique is that the assertion overlooks the possibility of synergy between utilitarian and deontological approaches. In reality, ethical decision-making often involves elements of both perspectives, with healthcare professionals weighing the consequences of actions while also upholding principles of duty and patient autonomy. By framing the issue as a dichotomy requiring balance, the statement fails to capture the complexity of ethical reasoning in healthcare. Finding a middle ground between these two ethical systems, however, has been difficult. When there is a contradiction between these two ethical principles in the medical arena, the disagreement must be addressed in order to reach an appropriate resolution for patients and others involved (Tseng & Wang, 2021). Moreover, the statement lacks specificity in defining what constitutes a "balance" between utilitarian and deontological perspectives. Without clear criteria for achieving this balance, it becomes challenging to implement in practice and may lead to subjective interpretations of ethical dilemmas. Overall, while recognizing the importance of both utilitarian and deontological perspectives in medical ethics, the statement oversimplifies the relationship between these frameworks and lacks clarity in proposing a solution to ethical dilemmas in healthcare. A more nuanced understanding of ethical reasoning, acknowledging the interplay between utilitarian and deontological considerations, is essential for addressing complex ethical challenges in modern medicine. Deontological ethics and utilitarian ethics are two major ideas that influence medical and health-care decision-making. Finding a middle ground between these two ethical philosophies has been difficult (Tseng & Wang, 2021).

Let's consider a scenario to understand the complexity of balance in ground reality of healthcare setting. In practice, this ethical dilemma plays out when a hospital's organ transplant committee must decide between a critically ill patient who has been on the waiting list for an extended period and a newly admitted patient with a higher chance of survival but fewer months on the list. **Utilitarian** reasoning might suggest prioritizing the latter patient to save more lives overall, while **deontological** reasoning might insist on honoring the waiting time and equal consideration for all patients. This scenario illustrates the complexity of balancing utilitarian and deontological perspectives in healthcare ethics. While utilitarian considerations may prioritize maximizing overall benefits, such as saving more lives, deontological principles demand respect for individual rights and fairness in resource allocation. Now what???

As well as dual-process theory of moral judgment is concerned, according to which characteristically deontological judgments (e.g. disapproving of killing one person to save several others) are driven by automatic emotional responses, while characteristically utilitarian judgments (e.g. approving of killing one to save several others) are driven by controlled cognitive processes, has its own limitations. There is lack of agreement on whether and how the two processes interact with one another. There is no support for the claim that emotionally driven intuitions are less reliable than those guided by reason. Greene's research itself shows that consequentialist responses to personal moral dilemmas involve at least one brain region that is associated with emotional processes hence, the claim that deontological judgments are less reliable than consequentialist judgments because they are influenced by emotions

cannot be justified. Furthermore there are also camera associated analogies that was used in this experiment. It is also unclear whether deontological responders, for example, rely blindly on the intuitively cued response without any thought of utilitarian considerations or whether they recognize the alternative utilitarian response but, on consideration, decide against it.

2. Conclusion

In the light of above notion, we want to make it clear that if balance is at the cost of one life to save more lives, then it's not balance. It's a compromise. Hence balance in practical and real life situations in healthcare is very critical to achieve. You have to rely on one approach, whether deontology or utilitarianism. In healthcare ethics, the interplay of utilitarianism and deontology is intricate. While perfect balance might never be achieved, our path forward resonates with compassion and integrity, shaping our approach to ethical decision-making in patient care. Furthermore, making ethical decisions in the context of patient care entails taking into account a variety of elements beyond those found in utilitarian or deontological principles. These could include the entire context of care, patient choices and preferences, medical evidence, and cultural concerns. Basically, even though it can be difficult to strike the ideal balance between deontology and utilitarianism, healthcare professionals try to confront moral conundrums by combining both ideas and being led by compassion and honesty. This all-encompassing strategy guarantees that patient care stays morally upright and focused on advancing the welfare of people and communities alike.

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Consent for Publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this commentary.

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